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ABSTRACT

The Philadelphia School District completed a community public opinion survey that identified certain attitudes previously established through a traditional process involving committee meetings, group discussions, and informal communications. Both the survey and the prior traditional process results reached the same conclusions regarding parental involvement in decision making -- particularly on issues of hiring and firing teachers. In addition, the survey established parental attitudes on school in general, as well as on discipline, curriculum, facilities, and communication with staff. More information was obtained in less time and with less cost by the survey than by the traditional method. This report demonstrates the utility of survey research not only in providing sound information, but also in accomplishing the task with meaningful savings in time and cost. (Author)

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SURVEY RESEARCH IN PUBLIC EDUCATION: A CHEAPER AND BETTER PROCESS

School boards and administrators throughout the nation are becoming increasingly involved in decisions which need to be based on representative information about parental and community attitudes. Community control, decentralization, sex education, black studies, integration, and bussing are just a few of the current topics demanding a clarification of public sentiment, for the benefit of both school officials and the public itself. And if disappointing pupil achievement, student unrest and the frequently cited alienation of our young people are to be taken seriously, we must also consider as essential representative information about student experiences, attitudes, and opinions.

The drama in public education today, in fact, increasingly involves the confrontation of school administrations with formally organized teachers, students, parents, and even formally organized administrators. These relatively new groups add their contributions to the highly vocal pronouncements of individuals whose affiliations and vested interests have traditionally been more obscure.

As school districts are expected to be increasingly responsive to the stated preferences or demands of the official spokesmen for these organized "publics" and the vocal individual alike, it is imperative that they seek to establish machinery by which representative information can systematically be obtained in a minimum of time and cost, and with a maximum of honesty and reliability. Only in this way can school boards and administrators assess properly the risks of particular decisions and reduce the uncertainty surrounding information available from other, less reliable sources. And properly chosen, the machinery can also provide an important vehicle for dialogue between the various groups involved on the one hand, and the school administration on the other.

Rapid and accurate evaluation of public experiences and sentiments on major issues affecting public education, then, can no longer be considered an unaffordable luxury in view of the increasing visibility and vulnerability of official policies. Unfortunately, however, too little is being done to obtain valid and reliable assessments of community opinion through survey research, the potentially most significant technique available. Unfortunate, also, is that the alternative processes often employed are not only of questionable value, but are usually very expensive and time-consuming.

This view can be stated rather simply in terms of the following three basic propositions:

1) The full potential of survey research has not been realized in educational research and planning.

2) A survey research approach can be both meaningful and relevant even when not employed at its most sophisticated data-analytic level.

3) Survey research offers both a cheaper and a better process for information gathering and dialogue than many of the more traditional approaches utilized in education.

While "surveys" and "opinionnaires" are commonly used in education as informational tools, the values of a more sophisticated survey research approach have generally been overlooked.[1/] Relatively few education research texts make reference to survey research, and then usually with only short narrative descriptions of the technique. One recent and generally superior book, for example, devotes a particularly well-written chapter to the mechanics of surveys, while suggesting that they have been "the most popular and the most widely used research method in education."[2/] Even here, however, no mention is made either of the data-analytic potential of survey research or of its value as a communications device.

In general, the available sources treat separately the survey and the interview, and fail to suggest that there is in fact any relationship between the two. To cite an extreme illustration of the narrow view of survey research promoted in the literature of education research, one source includes in its glossary of terms this less than satisfactory definition: "Survey: An investigation into some

educational problem area that may or may not result in recommendations."[3/]

In actual practice, the term "survey" is usually used in education to refer either to the qualitative overview of existing conditions in curriculum and administration most often associated with accreditation procedures, or to what are essentially reporting forms on the status of various characteristics or aspects of school district performance. Carefully conceived, conceptually sophisticated and intelligently administered "field surveys" dealing with experiences, attitudes and opinions are rare. Our contention is that the latter type of "field surveys" can improve significantly the decision-making process in public education and at the same time serve as an important communications process with individuals representing different and sometimes antagonistic groups.

It is not necessary, however, to exploit fully the data-analytic potentials in order to justify an investment of school district resources in survey research. To be practical, full utilization at this level of sophistication demands skills which may not be realistically available to many districts, and attempts to develop personnel with the requisite skills through in-service or staff development programs may be overly optimistic. Functioning at this level also requires an environment suitable for exploring social factors and relationships creatively, a condition which is usually denied the researcher in an operating agency. Hopefully the discussion of Philadelphia's experience that follows will illustrate the values of survey research when focused on a communications process designed to elicit truly representative views from the various population groups most intimately involved with public education today.

The more traditional methods used by school administrators to assess "community" sentiment have centered predominantly on highly individualistic points of view. On one side, this assessment has been handled as a staff function, by the school superintendent himself in some districts, or by an aide in larger districts, one of whom may be formally designated as a "public information"

specialist.[4] The resulting appraisals of community sentiment are necessarily intuitive rather than empirical, and often based on recent cocktail party experience and contacts with mysterious, unidentified "spokesmen." A refinement of this approach involves the invited reactions of individuals not on the staff of the school district, but who are already known to the administration and who increasingly are being paid by the administration for their "time." This, too, however, produces highly intuitive and individualistic points of view.

Another approach involves public hearings on particular issues, usually required by local laws or school codes, and "open" general meetings of the policy-making board. In these situations, individuals are given the opportunity to express their views, either as an individual or as a spokesman for a group. Those who take advantage of this kind of opportunity, however, are usually more "professional" than amateur in speaking before groups, and are often self-selected rather than elected. In either case, because of the nature of the situation, what is reflected is an extreme position rather than a consensus on particular issues. At any rate, from a practical point of view, it is almost always impossible for the school administration involved to determine the degree to which the individual point of view expressed is either accurate or truly representative of the larger public affected by the issue being addressed.

When compared with all of these traditional approaches just described, it seems obvious that survey research, utilizing scientific sampling techniques, represents a far better process. This is not to say that the traditional methods should be discarded. On the contrary, they do fulfill other needs that should not be ignored. But our point here is that public education can no longer rely upon them to provide the kind of information required today for decision-making.

There is one other major traditional process relevant to this issue in public education which has not yet been mentioned. This involves the group of individuals formally organized by the school administration for assessing

public experiences and sentiments. These groups are known by a wide variety of labels, including committee (ad hoc or otherwise), commission, task force, study group, and the like. Regardless of the label, however, the composition and effects are usually identical.

These groups are generally composed of very atypical individuals. The "representatives" who serve on them have personalities uncommonly comfortable in expressing themselves at large public meetings, uncommonly interested in attending public meetings, and uncommonly outspoken in espousing singular points of view.

In only rare instances do these groups come to grips with specific alternatives of school policy or the operational administration of such policies. When decisions are finally made, they tend to be based upon political pressures created by small sub-groups of aggressive and vocal individuals who may, or may not, represent a larger public in terms of the dimensions of policy under examination. Lacking specific guidelines on the quality or quantity of actual public support for the recommendations of such groups, school administrations tend to adopt policies with little if any awareness of the extent of public backing for these policies.

One specific situation that serves to illustrate these problems is Philadelphia's Commission on Decentralization and Community Participation. This Commission, not unlike comparable groups in other large cities, has had its share of difficulty in resolving the issues of establishing a uniform and fair system of increased community participation in the public schools.

In December, 1968, the Philadelphia Board of Education resolved to appoint a study commission for the purpose of preparing a report dealing with "administrative decentralization and public participation in the educational process" of Philadelphia's public schools. The Commission consisted of a small administrative staff plus no less than 68 members, including persons considered

"representative" of communities and Home and School Associations, as well as members of the Board itself, students, teachers, principals and other school administrators along with a single school-community coordinator. In fact, the Commission's interim report stated that those of its members who "... have been able to attend regularly...so constitute a representative cross section of the Philadelphia community...."[5/]

In the course of their activities, Commission members attended over one hundred meetings and forums of other commissions, committees, and community groups. Following several months spent reviewing the School District's present operations, the Commission then divided into four smaller units (three task forces and one committee), which then sponsored 38 two-hour forums throughout Philadelphia in the Spring of 1969. Out of about 250,000 parents of public school children in the City, approximately 3,000 persons attended these meetings. Such a small number of self-selected participants strongly suggests that true representation was not achieved, yet an interim report with suggested recommendations of the Commission was issued in November, 1969, based in large part upon the reactions of the 3,000 persons attending the spring meetings.

The Commission has as yet not conducted any systematic inquiry into existing activities in community participation at the individual schools in the City. While the Commission was deliberating the issues, and in the absence of specific policy guidelines, no less than 40 schools have apparently independently initiated their own forms of increased community participation by establishing local school advisory committees of various kinds. The exact number of these committees, however, has not been recorded, and the nature of their membership and manner of functioning is not centrally known.

Neither has any representative sampling of parental experiences or opinion on the issue of decentralization and community participation been undertaken by the Commission. In fact, this approach toward the issue is conspicuously absent from

consideration in the interim report as well as in an accompanying minority report.

Over one year has passed and over $125,000 has been spent by the School District on the Decentralization Committee's activities. A final report remains to be produced and many of the fundamental issues have not been resolved. Increased delays by the Commission in making recommendations and decisions promises only to proliferate further the variety of administrative forms and responsibilities assigned community groups. The ultimate effect of these delays can conceivably be to force the Commission either to accept passively the various administrative forms and responsibilities being developed by schools independently, and thus weaken the authority of the Commission to initiate policy, or to establish a single or very limited number of acceptable administrative forms of "decentralization and community participation," and thus endanger the structure of, and political support from, at least some of the community groups already established.

Can education research provide a better, faster, and less expensive mechanism for assessing community experiences and dispositions on this as well as other issues? Our answer is yes.

One vehicle proposed is survey research which utilizes area probability techniques. This involves the measurement of representative experiences and attitudes on the part of persons responding to a series of questions or statements, and who are selected through probability sampling (except where one hundred percent samples are desired of smaller populations). A second vehicle is the panel type of survey research, designed to obtain indications of attitudes toward major issues very quickly, and to measure changes in attitudes and opinions toward these issues over time. Examples of a viable approach already demonstrated successfully in Philadelphia can be found in three recent surveys of the first type.

As the result of one survey, not officially connected with the activities of the Commission on Decentralization and Community Participation, guidelines were developed for reactivating and expanding an existing local school advisory committee. The principal of the City's largest junior high school reconstructed his committee based upon the preferences expressed in a survey of parents of both his pupils and those in the sixth grades of eight "feeder" schools.

Survey results helped the principal in determining the kinds of school matters about which the committee should be concerned, the composition of the committee in terms of group representatives, size, length of service, meeting days and time, and the means for selecting Committee members.[6/] Survey research in this instance provided representative information not otherwise available to improve the kinds of decisions the principal felt he had to make anyway. The survey involved mailed questionnaires (23 percent response rate) with a one hundred percent sample, and was done at minimum cost.

In a second case, a survey of parents was conducted in an area scheduled for an unspecified kind of administrative innovation within a new school district then planned. This survey involved area probability sampling with household interviews, and was supported by the School District, the teachers' union, and a community group. It was probably the first such jointly supported research effort to deal systematically with the representative experiences and attitudes of parents.[7/] While the new administrative district was not established as originally planned - ostensibly for budgetary reasons - an administrator was appointed to provide special services to the cluster of schools involved.

It is difficult to assess the precise role of the survey findings in this situation, but they were presented and discussed with various local groups, with the Commission on Decentralization and Community Participation, and were featured in two articles in the teachers' union newsletter as well as in the Philadelphia newspapers. In any case, representative information on a variety of contemporary issues in public education, not available from any other sources, was developed fairly quickly and at modest cost.

Particularly notable in this regard was the similarity of the survey findings and some of the more generalized recommendations found in the interim report of the Decentralization Commission. Both the survey and the Commission process reached essentially the same conclusions regarding parental involvement in

decision-making, but the survey approach procured the information in less time and with less cost.

A third survey recently completed has examined the reactions to an experimental, ungraded "mini-school" as perceived by teachers, school administrators, students, and their parents. Both probability sampling and personal interviews were used extensively. Information obtained from this research is designed to help the Board of Education in deciding whether to continue its financial support of the school. More specifically, this research provides needed information on the effect of the school in achieving its stated objectives of improving student attendance, motivation, and feelings of personal security, improving parental participation in the school, and satisfaction with the education their children are receiving. In addition, the views of the teaching staff on communications with parents and students, and their comments on the facilities and curricula of the school, were also measured.[8/]

While it is not possible to predict the extent to which decisions regarding continued funding of the Mini School will be influenced by other factors and considerations, the Board of Education has expressed directly the felt need for representative information which can best be obtained through survey research.

These three surveys have been cited to illustrate two things. First of all, that survey research can provide a better process than the more traditional means employed in public education to assess community sentiment. On this point, survey research can obtain attitudes and opinions with a known degree of representativeness. At the same time that findings representing the majority view on individual issues are being established, attitudes and opinions held by significant minorities can be meaningfully documented.

Secondly, our experience in the Philadelphia public schools offers convincing evidence that survey research provides a cheaper process as well. The real cost of Commissions, task forces, study groups and similar special committees is difficult to establish and is almost always underestimated. The activities of such

groups have a tendency to consume much longer periods of time than anyone ever intended them to at the outset, and they seem to have a knack for devouring staff and other resources. On this count, too, survey research seems to have a decided edge.

Survey research, however, is not proposed here as the sole body of information upon which school administrations should base decisions. It does represent one of the most significant and underutilized information tools available to them. As too often occurs in the absence of reliable and representative information, school administrations must make rapid decisions under the not unbiased pressures of vocal personalities, either acting as individuals or on behalf of an unknown number of like-minded citizens. School administrations typically have neither the time nor the means to verify the genuine representativeness of such individuals as spokesmen for larger groups. If performed on a continuing basis, then, survey research can fill the information gaps present in responding to public pressures.

The use of continuous national polling was recently proposed as a means of providing information to policymakers at the national level regarding public opinion on foreign-policy matters. A panel of the United Nations Association of the United States of America reported that the communications gap had grown between the American public and foreign-policy makers such that surveys were required as an informational tool. "In a democracy," said Arthur Goldberg, a member of the committee, "where the right to govern ultimately rests on the consent of the public, a President should be continuously aware of what the public thinks, and wants, and worries about."[9/] This same kind of communications gap exists between the educational administrators, the students, their parents, the teachers and principals, and the public at large.

Survey research, however, is not without its limitations, and cannot do everything the administrator or researcher would wish it to. Public hearings for

example, do guarantee participants an opportunity to communicate their views directly to specific administrators, and in the presence of other citizens. A survey respondent does not necessarily have the same degree of assurance that his views will be communicated to administrators. The Commission or task force approach offers the advantage of engaging its members in an extended educational process, which hopefully will make them more committed to implementation of the ensuing recommendations. This objective can seldom be incorporated into the survey research approach without negating its time and cost advantages.

Furthermore, there are some who fear that the formulation of public policy based upon survey research will tend to give absolute power to a majority point of view. Public hearings on the other hand generally permit a minority, and often a very small minority, the opportunity of having its point of view expressed. There is concern that surveys will tend to ignore minority positions, however valuable and well-conceived.

In response to this, one must bear in mind that survey results are not to be evaluated in a social or political vacuum, and that the manner in which any survey data are presented can serve the interest of either, or both, majority and minority points of view. Our point here is that school administrations need to know where majority (and representative minority) opinion stands before acting on the "demands" of the vocal and articulate so-called "spokesman."

Survey research can provide rapid and reliable information representative of the public's experiences and attitudes within very small, and known, margins of error.[10/] This method tends to offer school administrations the opportunity to obtain (1) accurate and reliable information, (2) with a known margin of error, (3) from a representative public, (4) in a matter of weeks or months (not years), and (5) with less cost. Perhaps the most singular advantage of survey research is that it provides an opportunity for expression from both the more passive individuals as well as the aggressive members of the citizenry. In this

function, the interests of a democracy are further enhanced, since ignoring the more passive citizens would tend to encourage a society dependent upon vocal and aggressive personalities to mold public policy.

Notes and References

1. Perhaps the best statement on the potential of survey research as an analytical tool in social research can be found in Morris Rosenberg, The Logic of Survey Analysis (New York: Basic Books, 1968). See also Herbert Hyman, Survey Design and Analysis: Principles, Cases and Procedures (New York: The Free Press, 1955).

2. Hayman, John L., Jr., Research in Education. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968, p. 65.

3. McAshan, Hildreth Hoke. Elements of Educational Research. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1963, p. 16.

4. The only significant opposition to establishing a survey research function in the Philadelphia School District two and a half years ago came from its former director of public information, who viewed it as usurping his traditional position as chief assessor of public sentiment. Interestingly enough, there was no opposition from the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers once they were assured the requisite skills were available to conduct surveys in a professional manner.

5. Commission on Decentralization and Community Participation. Interim Report. Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, November 1969, p. 1 (authors' italics).

6. Division of Administrative and Survey Research. Strawberry Mansion Parent Survey. Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, October 1969.

7. Division of Administrative and Survey Research. Overbrook Cluster Parent Survey. Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, April 1969.

8. A final report on this descriptive evaluation of the Mantua-Powelton Mini School will be presented to the Philadelphia Board of Education in the Spring of 1970.

9. The Philadelphia Inquirer, February 1, 1970. Based on an Associated Press dispatch, Washington, D.C., January 31, 1970.

10. See Hyman, op. cit., and Mildred B Parten, Surveys, Polls and Samples (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).

Other examples of survey research conducted within the past few years in the Philadelphia School System include:

Division of Administrative and Survey Research. Philadelphia New Teacher Survey. Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, Spring 1968.

Division of Administrative and Survey Research. The Teaching of African and Afro-American Studies in the Philadelphia Public Schools, 1968/69 Academic Year. Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, 1969.

Division of Administrative and Survey Research. The Schools and Security: The Views of Some Teachers and Principals. Philadelphia: The School District of Philadelphia, November 1968 (mimeographed).

For examples of survey research conducted in other communities, see:

Center for Urban Education. Community Attitudes in Bedford-Stuyvesant: An Area Study. New York: Center for Urban Education, 1967.

Wilder, David E. with Natalie S. Friedman, Robert B. Hill, Eva Sandis and Sam D. Sieber. Actual and Perceived Consensus on Educational Goals Between School and Community. New York: Columbia University, Bureau of Applied Social Research, 1968.

Swanson, Bert E , Edith Cortin and Eleanor Main. "Parents in Search of Community Influence in the Public Schools," Education and Urban Society, August, 1969.